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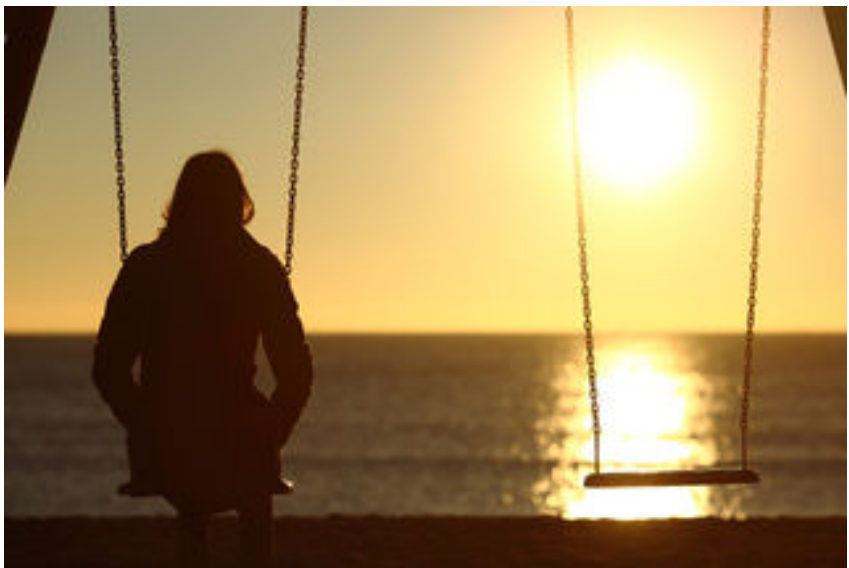
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The Compassion Chronicles

EMBARRASSMENT

Why Don't Victims of Sexual Harassment Come Forward Sooner?

These are eight reasons why victims of sexual harassment don't come forward.

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People seem to ask this question every time a high-profile sexual harassment or assault case is reported. Cases like the recent article from Washington Post detailing allegations against Roy Moore, Alabama’s Republican candidate for Senate, seems to have offered fresh opportunities to perpetuate victim blaming. It is amazing how many people shift the blame onto alleged victims, asking why they waited until now.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission reports receiving 12,000 allegations of sex-based harassment each year, with women accounting for

about 83 percent of the complainants. That figure is believed to be just the tip of the iceberg. In a study issued last year, the co-chairwomen of a commission task force said that roughly three to four people experiencing such harassment never tell anyone in authority about it. Instead, they said women typically “avoid the harasser, deny or downplay the gravity of the situation, or attempt to ignore, forget, or endure the behavior.”

It is indeed very common for victims to delay disclosing their trauma, if they ever do. But since even highly educated people are continually baffled by why women don’t come forward, I offer some information based on the psychology of abuse and my forty-year experience working with victims of sexual abuse, sexual assault, and sexual harassment to help answer this question.

Let’s begin by making sure we are all on the same page. Sexual harassment and behaviors that fall under this category include: inappropriate touching; invasion of privacy; sexual jokes; lewd or obscene comments or gestures; exposing body parts; showing graphic images; unwelcome sexual emails, text messages, or phone calls; sexual bribery, coercion, and overt requests for sex; sexual favoritism; being offered a benefit for a sexual favor; being denied a promotion or pay raise because you didn’t cooperate. And of course, some women experience what more aptly could be described as sexual assault: being forced to perform oral sex on a man in a position of power, a man in power forcing himself on the woman either orally, vaginally, or anally, being drugged and rendered unconscious or incapable of defending oneself.

Below I have listed the most significant reasons why women do not come forward more often or delay in coming forward. While I recognize that men are also sexually harassed and assaulted, due to limited space, I am going to limit this article to a discussion about female victims of sexual harassment and assault. Male victims do, however, suffer from many of the same after-effects and have many of the same reasons for not coming forward.

Shame

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Women, in particular, feel shame, because they are often blamed for being sexually assaulted. Even today, women are accused of causing their own victimization with comments like, “What did she expect when she dresses like she does?” and “She shouldn’t have had so much to drink.”

And women are used to being shamed and feeling shame. Women feel shame when they are heckled by men on the street. They feel shame when men make fun of their body or make disparaging remarks about the size of their breasts or behinds. They feel shame when their entire being is reduced to how attractive or unattractive a man finds them.

This sense of shame has a cumulative effect. Depending on how much a woman has already been shamed by previous abuse or by bullying, she may choose to try to forget the entire incident, to put her head in the sand and try to pretend it never happened.

Denial, Minimization

This tendency to blame themselves and to be overwhelmed with shame leads into the next important reason why women don’t come forward: denial and minimization. Many women refuse to believe that the treatment they endured was actually abusive. They downplay how much they have been harmed by sexual harassment and even sexual assault. They convince themselves that “it wasn’t a big deal.” As one client told me, “I know a lot of women who were brutally raped, and I have friends who were sexually abused in childhood. Being sexually harassed by my boss was nothing compared to what these women went through. I told myself to just move on and forget the whole thing.”

Unfortunately, this same client had come to see me because she was suffering from depression. She couldn’t sleep at night, she had no appetite, she had lost her motivation, and she had isolated herself from friends and family. When we traced these symptoms back, we discovered that they all began after the sexual harassment incident. Depression is one of the major after-effects of sexual harassment or assault. Victims may experience self-doubt, which can lead to self-blame, and the hopelessness of the situation can also lead to depression.

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Other women are good at making excuses for their abusers. I have often heard victims of sexual harassment say things like “I felt sorry for him,” or “I figured he wasn’t getting enough sex at home,” or even “I knew he couldn’t help himself.”

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tell her story of how Roy Moore sexually attacked her when she was 16 and said, “I thought I was Roy Moore’s only victim.”

Fear of the Consequences

Fear of the repercussions is a huge obstacle women face when it comes to reporting sexual harassment or assault — fear of losing their job, fear they won’t find another job, fear they will be passed over for a promotion, fear of losing their credibility, fear of being branded a troublemaker, fear of being blackballed in their industry, fear of their physical safety. This is true whether it is a case of a young woman in her first job being harassed, an actress trying to make her way in the entertainment business, or a career woman desperately trying to break through the glass ceiling.

Many don’t disclose, because they fear they won’t be believed, and until very recently, that has primarily been the case. The fact that sexual misconduct is the most under-reported crime is due to a common belief that women make up these stories for attention or to get back at a man who rejected them. Victims’ accounts are often scrutinized to the point of exhaustion. In high-profile cases, victims are often labeled opportunists, blamed for their own victimization, and punished for coming forward.

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Another reason why victims don’t report or delay reporting is that they fear retaliation, and we have evidence from recent events to validate that fear. Sexual harassers frequently threaten the lives, jobs, and careers of their victims. And many victims are frightened by the perpetrator’s position of power and what he could do with it. Those who have reported sexual harassment or assault, especially by powerful men, have reported that they lost their jobs, and that their careers or reputations have been destroyed. In the case of Harvey Weinstein, the New Yorker reported that he enlisted private security agencies staffed with “highly experienced and trained in Israel’s elite military and government intelligence units” to collect information on women and journalists who tried to expose sexual harassment allegations against him. This fear of retaliation does not only apply to high-profile cases; people who wield their power to prey on other people are often quite adept at holding onto that power by any means necessary. Sexual harassment cuts across all industries — Hollywood, politics, media, tech, and service industries, like food services.

Low Self-Esteem

Some victims have such low self-esteem that they don’t consider what happened to them to be very serious. They don’t value or respect their own bodies or their own integrity, so if someone violates them, they downplay it. As one client who had been sexually violated by a boss when she was in her early twenties shared with me: “Guys were always coming on to me and trying to grab me back then. When my boss did it, I figured, ‘Why not let him do what he wants, no big deal.’” But my client had not anticipated what the short-term and long-term consequences of “giving herself away” might be. “When I look back, I can recognize that my boss violating me was a real turning point in my life. After that, I started acting out. I had never taken drugs before, but when someone offered me some cocaine, I thought, ‘Why not?’ When guys wanted to party, including having group sex, I figured, ‘What have I got to lose?’ I just stopped caring about myself.”

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reaction to being violated or abused. In fact, abuse, by its very nature, is humiliating and dehumanizing.” This is especially true with sexual violations. The victim feels invaded and defiled, while simultaneously experiencing the indignity of being helpless and at the mercy of another person.

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This sense of shame often causes victims to blame themselves for the sexual misconduct of their perpetrator. Case in point, Lee Corfman, the woman who reported to a Washington Post reporter that she was molested by Roy Moore when she was 14, said, “I felt responsible. I thought I was bad.” Time after time, clients who experienced sexual harassment at work or at school have told me things like: “I assumed it was my fault. I’m a very friendly person, and I always smiled and said hello to my boss. I think he must have thought I was flirting with him.” Another client, a student who was sexually assaulted by one of her college professors told me, “I liked all the attention I was getting from him. We’d sit for hours in his office talking, and I was learning a lot from him. I guess I was sending him the wrong message.”

Understanding more about the emotion of shame can help explain why women blame themselves when they are violated, and why more women do not report sexual assault or harassment. Shame is a feeling deep within us of being exposed and unworthy. When we feel ashamed, we want to hide. We hang our heads, stoop our shoulders, and curve inward as if trying to make ourselves invisible. Most people who have been deeply shamed take on the underlying and pervasive belief that they are defective or unacceptable. They feel unworthy, unlovable, or “bad.” Shame can also cause us to feel isolated — set apart from the crowd. In fact, in primitive cultures, people were banished from the tribe when they broke society’s rules. Being shamed feels like being banished — unworthy to be around others.

Sexual harassment and assault can be a humiliating experience to recount privately, let alone publicly. Victims of sexual harassment and sexual assault in adulthood or sexual abuse in childhood tend to feel shame, because as human beings, we want to believe that we have control over what happens to us. When that personal power is challenged by a victimization of any kind, we feel humiliated. We believe we should have been able to defend ourselves. And because we weren’t able to do so, we feel helpless and powerless. This powerlessness causes humiliation — which leads to shame.

It is often easier to blame oneself than to admit that you were rendered helpless or victimized by another person. As humans, we want to believe that we are in control of our own lives. When something that occurs reminds us that, in fact, we are not always in control, it is very upsetting. So upsetting that we would prefer to blame ourselves for our victimization.

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price to pay for “going along” with sexual exploitation. A woman doesn’t just give away her body; she gives away her integrity.

In the last several years there has been a focus on raising the self-esteem of girls and young women. We want our young women to feel proud and strong, to walk with their heads held high. We try to instill confidence in them and tell them they can do whatever they set their minds to do. We send them off to college with the feeling that they are safe, that they can protect themselves, and that we will protect them. But this is a lie. They are not safe, they don’t know how to protect themselves, and we don’t protect them.

By far the most damaging thing to affect the self-esteem of young girls and women is the way they are mistreated in our culture. Beginning in early childhood, the average girl experiences unwanted sexual remarks and sexual behavior from boys and men. Remarks about her body and her sexuality come from boys at school and from men on the streets. Young girls today continually complain that they are bullied in school — not in the way we think of boys bullying other boys — but by boys making remarks about their genitals, their behinds, and as they get older, about their breasts. In today’s schools, there is a common practice of boys running by girls and grabbing their behinds or breasts and running away.

Even the most confident girl cannot sustain her sense of confidence if she is sexually violated. She feels so much shame that it is difficult to hold her head up high. She finds it difficult to have the motivation to continue on her path, whether it be college or a career.

Feelings of Hopelessness and Helplessness

Research has shown us that victims who cannot see a way out of an abusive situation soon develop a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, and this in turn contributes to them giving up and not trying to escape or seek help. Specifically, learned helplessness is a condition in which a person suffers from a sense of powerlessness, arising from a traumatic event or persistent failure to succeed and considered to be one of the underlying causes of depression. A concept originally developed by the research of psychologist Martin Seligman and Steven D. Meier, learned helplessness is a phenomenon that says when people feel like they have no control over what happens, they tend to simply give up and accept their fate.

Women feel it is useless to come forward, because they have seen the way others have been treated. They feel it is hopeless, because they won’t be believed, and their reputations will be tainted, if not ruined. Women who have already been sexually assaulted or harassed feel especially helpless, since the chances are extremely high that they did not receive the justice they so desperately needed. These fears can cause women to think there is nowhere to turn, to feel trapped and even hopeless.

Most women feel they are on their own when it comes to protecting themselves from sexual harassment. While they may take precautions to protect themselves, overall, they still feel helpless about changing the situation. Many women have learned the hard way that going to the HR in their company is useless, since HR departments are notorious for protecting the company at all costs.

As mentioned above, many women are overwhelmed with self-blame and debilitating shame due to sexual harassment. This self-blame and debilitating shame robs them of their power, their sense of efficacy and agency, and their belief that they can change their circumstances.

Some women don’t have the emotional strength to stand up to intense manipulation, to sexual pressure, or to threats of rejection. While they may take precautions against being sexually assaulted, from avoiding walking alone at night, to avoiding eye contact, to carrying pepper spray in their handbags, measures such as these don’t take away their overarching fear, brought on by witnessing and experiencing the consistent objectification of women, as well as evidence of the rape culture which currently permeates our country. In a recent study, researchers found that the treatment of women as sex objects has shown to contribute to women’s fear of sexual assault. According to Dr. Laurel Watson, a psychology professor specializing in trauma at the University of

A History of Being Sexually Violated

Closely related to the above, women who have already been traumatized by child sexual abuse or by sexual assault as an adult are far less likely to speak out about sexual harassment at work or at school. Research shows that survivors of previous abuse and assault are at a higher risk of being sexually assaulted again. For example, research shows that 38 percent of college-aged women who have been sexually violated had first been victimized prior to college.

Those who experienced previous abuse will likely respond to overtures of sexual harassment much differently than women who have not been abused. As one client shared with me, “Time after time I just freeze when a guy makes a sexual advance, hoping it will stop him or he will walk away.” This “freezing reaction” is a common one for those who were sexually abused in childhood. And as was mentioned above, those who have previously been victimized are more likely to keep quiet about the abuse, since they may have already had the experience of not being believed and not receiving justice.

Lack of Information

Recent statistics show that 70 percent of women suffer sexual harassment on the job. In fact, the stats for sexual harassment are the same as those for sexual assault: one in every four women nationwide have been sexually harassed at work. And yet many women, even highly educated ones, are uneducated about exactly what constitutes sexual harassment, don't recognize sexual harassment as a real threat, don't understand how sexual harassment or assault affected them, nor do they understand the real world consequences of not reaching out for help or not reporting it. For example, the emotional effects of this type of harassment can have devastating psychiatric effects, including:

- Anxiety
- Loss of self-esteem
- PTSD — Studies have found a link between victims of sexual harassment and PTSD, which causes the victim to re-live the harassment and avoid situations where it could happen again.
- Suicidal behavior — Studies suggest that sexual harassment can lead to suicidal behavior. Up to 15 of 1,000 females studied reported saying they made suicidal attempts after suffering from some sort of sexual harassment.

Disbelief, Dissociated, or Drugged

Finally, sometimes women don't report sexual harassment or assault, because at the time of the abuse they were drugged, inebriated, or dissociated. As was the case with the Bill Cosby accusers — it is not uncommon for women and girls to have been drugged by their abusers and, because of this, to have only vague memories. Others may have been so drunk before the assault that they doubt their memories, and as we know, some are so traumatized that they dissociated during the attack and have only vague memories. It usually takes one woman coming forward before a woman is able to trust her own memories of the experience. Unless other women come forward to make a complaint about someone, most will continue doubting themselves and assuming they will be doubted if they report.

It is understandable that women have a difficult time coming forward for a number of reasons. These women deserve our recognition about how difficult it is and our compassion for what they have been through. Women need to be encouraged to begin to push away their internalized shame with anger and to learn how to give the shame back to their abusers.

Instead of focusing so much energy on trying to figure out why victims don't report, it would be far more productive to ask, “Why do we allow men to continue to sexually harass and assault women?” Perhaps even more important, we need to stop asking why victims wait to report and instead focus on how we can better

National Sex Assault Hotline: (800) 656-4673



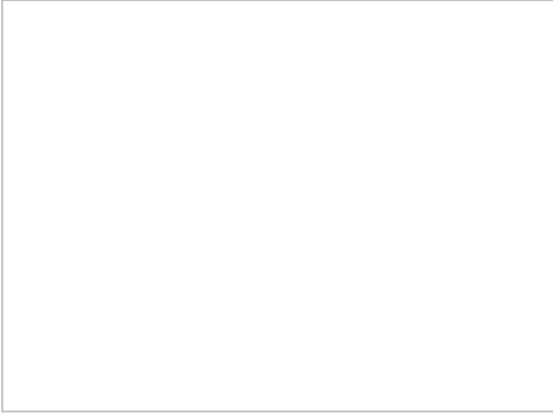
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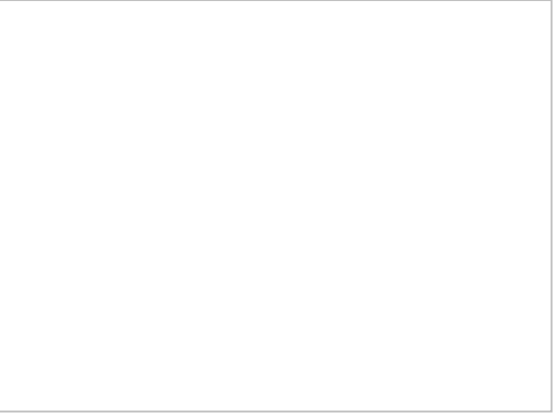


Beverly Engel has been a psychotherapist for over 30 years and is the author of 20 books, including *The Emotionally Abusive Relationship* and *The Right to Innocence*.
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